

## **'Comparable to MTV – but better': The impact of *The Chart Show* on British music video culture, 1986-1998.**

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### **Abstract**

*The Chart Show* was a weekly UK TV programme showcasing music videos from the MRIB Network Chart and a range of independent and specialist pop music charts. It began broadcasting on Friday evenings on Channel 4 in April 1986 and ran for three series until September 1988. Its production company, Video Visuals, subsequently found a new home for *The Chart Show* with Yorkshire Television on ITV, where it went out on Saturday mornings between January 1989 and August 1998. What made the show unique in the British broadcasting context was that it was the first presenter-less pop chart programme that showcased popular music exclusively in video form. Beginning at a time when MTV was still unavailable in the UK, *The Chart Show* was innovatory in consolidating music video as the lingua franca of the pop singles market. Drawing on archival sources from Channel 4, and the trade and popular music presses, this article shows how *The Chart Show* helped shape the form of music video, contributed to its commercial status, boosted singles sales and drove industry demand and production schedules. It argues that an appreciation of music video is dependent upon the historical specificity of its broadcast context.

**Keywords:** *The Chart Show*, MTV, Keith Macmillan, music video, Channel 4, ITV

## Origins

Writing about the 'uneasy relationship' between popular music and television, Simon Frith argues that 'it was only with the emergence of cable television in the 1980s that a music television service was developed with anything like the day-to-day significance of music radio. Music television, MTV, duly aped Top 40 radio formats, with playlists, veejays, "hot" releases, "breaking" singles, etc.' (Frith 2002: 279). Although of course the relationship between television, popular music and youth culture has a much longer history (see Frith 1998, Mundy 1999, Inglis 2010), Frith (2002) identifies the moment of MTV as its coming-of-age, largely by dint of its borrowing from the established formats of radio. But MTV's other major innovation was that it 'immediately privileged the form of the video clip over the live performance' (Huq 2010: 113), appearing to resolve the particular problem of 'liveness' in music performance (see Auslander 1999) that had dogged pop TV shows since the late 1950s (and had in part given rise to the pop promo as a consequence). Additionally, as Pat Aufderheide's early assessment claimed, 'The [US] success of MTV has been based on an understanding that the channel offers not videos but environment, a context that creates mood' (Aufderheide 1986: 63). Furthermore, in terms of scholarship, the advent of MTV defined the way in which music video as a form was understood. Steve Jones reflects:

Scholarly interest was not so much placed in music videos *per se* as it was in music videos on MTV. Such placement was appropriate, for it was in the context of MTV, a particularly commercial context aimed toward creating MTV as a brand that would carry with it aspects of commercial culture, that the logics of viewing music video operated (2005: 86-7).

All of these elements (MTV's pop radio format, its privileging of the video clip, its creation of environment and its commercial brand) shaped a definition of the channel as quintessentially postmodern (see Aufderheide 1986, Fiske 1986, Wollen 1986, Kaplan 1987 and Goodwin 1993).

Andrew Goodwin (1993), conversely, has argued for a more historically grounded account of the role of television in framing music video. He points out that despite its subsequent cultural influence MTV's initial appeal was limited, especially overseas. MTV was a cable service and the particularly slow roll-out of cable and satellite provision in the UK meant that its screen impact was muted.<sup>1</sup> Paul Bonner reports: 'It was not until the mid-1990s, after the arrival in the UK of massive North American capital and know-how, that cable technology could reach the sort of maturity that broadcast technology has reached by the end of the 1970s' (Bonner with Aston 2003: 412). Indeed, in its first phase, between its New York launch on 1 August 1981, its acquisition by Viacom, Inc. in 1985, and the inception of MTV Europe from Amsterdam in 1987, it had a far greater impact on British music video producers (in stimulating demand and showcasing British acts in the US) than it did on UK audiences. Goodwin notes that 'MTV in this period was identified heavily with the so-called second "British Invasion" of synth-pop acts' (Goodwin 1993: 49). It wasn't until the 1990s that MTV made any significant inroads in the UK with an all-time high viewing share of 1.6% in 1992 (source BARB). By December 1996, when the MTV Europe Music Awards were held in London for the first time, the lacklustre atmosphere of the event reported by trade magazine *Promo*, 'may have had something to do with the non-essential nature of MTV in the pop life of the UK':

Viewing figures for MTV in the UK have been nothing to write home about, to say the least. Its previous pan-European nature is obviously one reason.

Another is probably something to do with the format. Unlike in the US, where the advent of MTV introduced something distinctly different and leftfield from mainstream TV, MTV has not had the same impact in Britain against terrestrial channels (which has far more pop music than you would find on American terrestrial (Knight 1996c: 13).

Thus, while these accounts all recognize the primary significance of MTV in music video history, they also acknowledge that its influence was never universally pervasive. It follows that any history of music video needs to take account of broadcast contexts other than MTV.

This article concentrates on the UK context, where back in 1986 the way was left clear for the development of a homegrown version of MTV on terrestrial television to rival the BBC's long-running chart show *Top of the Pops* (1964-2006). Although *Top of the Pops* had shown an increasing proportion of music videos since the mid-1970s, its staple format remained the live studio appearance of pop acts singing and miming instrumentals to a playback, and successive BBC producers were wary of the nascent impact of music video on the presenter-orchestrated studio space with its herded gaggle of a captive audience. By the time producer Paul Ciani took over from Brian Whitehouse in 1989 the show's studio immediacy was an orthodoxy robustly defended:

The record companies should get their act together and get the bands available for appearing on *Top of the Pops* – it's going to be the choice between almost a full number if you appear live and half, or even less, of a track if it's a promo you're offering ... I don't see why we should waste prime air time by putting them out (Ciani 1988: 4).

So despite the rise of music video, that studio format had shown itself to be durable and the show still commanded an audience of between 10 and 12million, compared with *The Tube* (Channel 4, 1982-1987) that struggled to muster a million by 1986 (Frith 1993: 68).

Yet having identified the youth market as a primary target for exploitation in a rapidly changing international television landscape, broadcasters from the mid-1980s were looking for new ways to capitalize on popular music's *lingua franca*. As Simon Frith has documented:

For the new European television services, youth programming meant music programming from the start, and this equation also reflected the increasing music industry investment in television. Britain's three biggest independent rock labels, Virgin, Island and Chrysalis, were, by the mid-1980s, equally involved in television (1993: 70).

In 1982 the UK's new fourth channel, in keeping with its remit to be innovative in programme form and content, had launched *The Tube* as a Friday night antidote to *Top of the Pops*. Broadcasting live from a regional base in Newcastle, its unstructured, unscripted and sometimes unruly 'liveness' became notorious, and the opportunity it offered to unsigned and uncharted new talents was unprecedented. By 1985, Channel 4's commissioning editor for youth programmes John Cummins (who had been a researcher on *The Tube* before replacing Mike Bolland in March 1984), was looking for a new chart show format for 1986 to fill the Friday night early evening slot between series of *The Tube*; he commissioned some research.

The brief was that a new show should avoid copying *Top of the Pops*, but should seek to exploit the established appeal of pop charts and chart facts, and would draw on the Media Research Information Bureau (MRIB) chart data used for *The Network Chart Show* (produced by Capital Radio) which had already proved a popular rival to BBC Radio One's Top 40 Chart across the independent radio network since its launch in September 1984. The MRIB chart differed from the BBC's 'official chart' (compiled by Gallup) in that it used airplay data in addition to sales figures (sometimes with surprisingly different results).

Producer of *The Tube*, Jill Sinclair, arrived at two alternative proposals, 'following intensive investigations and endless discussions with a number of interested parties' (Sinclair 1986). Option one was a conventional studio-based show which would be presenter-fronted with a 'hand-picked, natch' audience, and would feature, like *Top of the Pops*, a mixture of appearances by artists miming to 'specially re-recorded' playback and music video inserts.

Its distinctive aspect, however, would be in drawing on positions 40-75 of the Network Chart and featuring 'live acts and videos from other charts: USA, Disco, Indie, Reggae, Compact Disc'. Because it would go out on a Friday, unlike *Top of the Pops*, it would predict and preview high climbers and new entries in the following week's chart:

By previewing sure chart entries it would still be possible to include the likes of Wham! and Duran Duran, but there would be more scope and a greater need to spot the less obvious potential hits and feature bands in the lower reaches who aren't exposed on television as a matter of course (ibid.).

Refreshing as this approach to the charts might have been, the challenges of this model were cost, finding the right presenter, and studio space. It was left to *Music Week*, in early 1986, to speculate that this new programme *might* be fronted by DJ David 'Kid' Jensen (who hosted the Capital Radio show) and *might* be produced by Tyne Tees television (who made *The Tube*) (*Music Week* 1986a: 1).<sup>2</sup>

Option two was a Top 40 video show – the brainchild of director Keith Macmillan. Macmillan's career had begun as a stills photographer for album sleeves, before he graduated to directing concert tours (making over 30 concert films, notably Bob Marley's *Exodus*) and pop promos (winning a BAFTA for Paul McCartney's 'Pipes of Peace') (Anon. 2006). Between 1976 and 1984 Macmillan and his business partner Philip Davey produced more than 600 promos, and they set up the first US video production company in Hollywood in 1979. Macmillan's venture into TV began with Channel 4's 1985 presenter-less, live Heavy Metal show *Extra Celestial Transmission* (E.C.T.) (Anon. 1996c: 3-4). Nine months later his plan for a new chart video programme would guarantee a screening (in part or in whole) to all the climbers and highest new entries in the Network Chart and would also feature 'the best and most interesting videos' in other charts (as option one). In this model the video would be centre stage, and Sinclair expressed some concerns about 'the inability to include much of the indie chart (because they don't all have videos)'. Furthermore,

although this option would be, radically, presenter-less, it would need 'a strong editorial line' because it 'would be more at the mercy of the record-buying public ... and unimaginative video makers' (Sinclair 1986).

Intrinsic to this format, therefore, was not only its new approach to chart data but, implicitly, quality judgements about music videos as a form – a form which Simon Frith suggests, 'foregrounds the performance of music rather than the music itself' (1998: 225). Yet Frith goes on to make claims for the relative autonomy afforded by music videos 'because they enable musicians (or their record companies) to translate their performing ideals into televisual terms directly, without having to be mediated by the established norms of TV entertainment' (ibid.).

Jill Sinclair expressed a rather different view, proposing that while this format would showcase the best new videos, 'it must also be permissible to pass comment on the worst ones (fast-forward in vision?)' – *mediation* indeed. Significantly, although when option two was commissioned as *The Chart Show* it incorporated those computer graphics and on-screen VCR controls Sinclair had suggested ('finding a linking idea using graphics and computer animation'), it stopped short of the heavy-handed editorial techniques she recommended. Overall Sinclair divined that this option, which drew in part on the graphic originality of video-makers Annabel Jankel and Rocky Morton's avatar *Max Headroom* (Channel 4, 1985-87), and was in part 'comparable to MTV – but better', presented 'an opportunity to try an entirely new variation on a theme' (Sinclair 1986). *The Chart Show* certainly proved to illustrate a totally new engagement of television with popular music, wherein the nature of music video as a form, and a commercial and legal entity, would be defined in ways significantly different from MTV (outlined above) but on terms that would be no less hotly contested.<sup>3</sup>

## The Format

Keith Macmillan's Video Visuals was duly commissioned to produce a show with the unpromising working title 'The Vidiots' on the basis of a pitch that read:

26 x 60' shows combining music videos and state of the art computer animation,  
which is used to link latest hit music videos in a series of comic incidents  
& running gags. Content chart based with regular exclusive showings of videos  
(Channel 4 Television 1986).

It was to be broadcast on Friday evenings between 1730 and 1830 beginning on 11 April 1986. Macmillan would direct and executive produce; Jill Sinclair would be the producer. As it turned out, the implicitly satirical, tongue-in-cheek character of the show (perhaps combining the surrealism of *Kenny Everett's Video Show* (ITV, 1978-81) with the sardonic wit of *Max Headroom*) was diminished in favour of computer graphics framing devices designed by Electric Image (in bright, primary colours and geometric lines) that allowed the videos to speak for themselves and foregrounded the lively competition of chart performance. The artists, Macmillan insisted, were the stars of the show: 'The graphics don't compete with them – they're like visual punctuation marks' (Anon. 1996c: 4).

The first episode opened with INXS 'What You Need', followed by the Heavy Metal singles chart featuring ZZ Top's 'Rough Boy' and Van Halen's 'Why Can't This Be Love?'. The Network Albums chart showcased A-ha's *Hunting High and Low* with their video for 'Train of Thought' and Prince's *Parade* album with his single-release 'Kiss'. Part one concluded with a 'video reveal' of Jean-Michel Jarre's 'Fourth Rendez-vous'. Part two ran through the Dance Chart, the Indie Chart and the Reggae chart highlighting, respectively, 'Secret Lovers' by Atlantic Starr, 'Shellshock' by New Order, and 'Hello Darling' by Tippa Irie. More 'video reveals' screened Madonna's 'Live to Tell' and Depeche Mode's 'A Question of Lust'. The show then built to its climax by featuring three from the Network Chart: Gary Numan with



'This is Love' (New Entry at 39), Big Country's 'Look Away' (High Climber at 10) and 'All The Things She Said' by Simple Minds (High Climber at 5). And it ended with what became, the show's first incarnation, a familiar chart prediction competition. On-screen captions over an old silent slapstick comedy excerpt invited viewers to 'Predict the Order of the Top Three and Win a Great Prize', reminding them: 'Important! You must post your prediction by noon TOMORROW... To see if you are right listen to the Network Chart Show on Independent Radio at 5pm on Sunday'. The first week's contenders were: Cliff & The Young Ones and 'Living Doll', George Michael's 'A Different Corner' and the Euro-Baroque 'Rock Me Amadeus' by Falco. It was already 'Living Doll's' third week at Number 1 and it duly gave way to George Michael who held the spot for the subsequent three weeks, only to be eclipsed finally by Falco on 10 May. Thus a formula was established that proved, with minor adjustments, to be both popular and enduring.

*The Chart Show* immediately attracted an audience of 1.2million that it maintained, more or less, throughout its twelve-year run. Indeed, by its third series on Channel 4, in March 1988, it was consistently drawing audiences of over 2million. Not in the *Top of the Pops* league perhaps, but very respectable for Channel 4.

Yet if the show's presentation of its video content appeared dutiful enough (with the fast-forward and rewind mock VCR controls used like juke box navigation as a means of selecting rather than dismissing) its creator Keith Macmillan, like producer Jill Sinclair, maintains its editorial function was paramount:

We are aggressively editorial. It doesn't look it if you're just a casual viewer, but if you look closely we're not really a chart show. We're chart-based because we feature things like the independent chart, the metal chart and dance chart. No-one else on television does that, so I think we've got a real good reason for being there (Quoted in Sweeting 1988).

The pop press by and large agreed. John McCready, writing in *New Musical Express*, enthused:

It's taken us a long time to get there but this blur of current money-makers is perfect. It understands pop implicitly ... The video material is treated with a healthy lack of respect. *The Chart Show* races through pop like it's everything and nothing ... It's the point at which television has come to terms with the simplicity pop demands (McCready 1987).

Mike Davies of *For The Record* admired the construction: 'Undoubtedly the slickest piece of video editing ever to grace a pop music show (just watch how it segues from promo to promo, graphic to graphic with the skill of the most consummate DJ mixer)' (Davies 1988).

In featuring 'specialist' charts, the programme not only provided a broader spectrum of music, but was instrumental in breaking new bands, whether they had videos or not. Rupa Huq recalls something of its impact:

It was in the indie chart slot that I was exposed to the sight of New Order's 'True Faith' video, directed and choreographed by French mime artist Philippe Decouflé (featuring colourfully-attired dancers in inflatable suits turning somersaults and slapping one another) and the ramshackle amateur-looking video of 'Rules And Regulations' by Birmingham lo-fi guitar girl band We've Got A Fuzzbox And We're Going To Use It: within three years, they were appearing on *Top Of The Pops* as a polished girl group, signed to WEA. The Soup Dragons effected a similar change in career direction between their early appearances on *The Chart Show* (performing 'Soft As Your Face') and their later chart success with 'I'm Free', issued on the back of the Madchester indie boom in 1990. The indie segment of *The Chart Show* (and Channel 4 itself) were sometimes subject to moments where still-photos covered up for a lack of moving content: in its infancy, there were sometimes insufficient

advertisers to fill a commercial break, necessitating the onscreen display of the programme's logo to the sounds of musak. Similarly, indie chart acts without a video (such as House Of Love's 'Destroy The Heart') had to be content with a simple photograph of the band to accompany their songs (Huq 2013: 115).

As Huq documents, the show was innovative in the way it assembled and presented music video and injected significant variety into the complexion of chart music. To redeploy Aufderheide's terms, its *environment* was slick and tech-savvy, its *mood* was colourful and carefree; in short it created a contemporary, palatable and popular commercial pop aesthetic capable of embracing the extremes of Psychic TV's 'Godstar' and Robert Palmer's 'Addicted to Love'. *The Chart Show* seemed well-positioned to drive up the quantity and quality of music video on UK television, ensuring that the video became a necessary promotional currency for commercial success across a spectrum of music genres.

### Formal Effects

It may be useful at this point to suggest some conceptual terms in order to understand better *The Chart Show's* innovation in weekly, chart-based, presenter-less, pop music programming. Its distinctiveness resides in three semiotic aspects of its presentation of music video content: **aggregation**, **sequencing** and **framing**. Aggregation is the selection and assimilation of separate constituent elements with formal similarities which in this case designate music videos as the primary content within a discrete 45/60minute programme format. Sequencing explains the ordering of these individual elements within the linear chronology of a particular programme, and the sub-division of that programme into a number of distinct lists across two parts separated by a commercial break (different chart run-downs, and repeated tags – 'new entry', 'high climber', 'video reveal' – applied to selected videos). Framing, accounts for the editorial presentation of the content with extra-textual additions:

graphics, interstitials, titling, jingles, 'Fact Files' and so on. These televisual codes are important presentational factors by which TV pop shows compiled entirely of music videos had a profound effect on the status of the product. Because it was from the word go presenter-less and savvy in its editorial élan, whilst remaining within the scheduled framework of commercial broadcast television, *The Chart Show* surpassed even MTV in this capacity. Arguably, the combination of these three codes exerted two countermanding tendencies: they elevated the individual video clip above the status of (for example) a discrete advertisement within the sequence of a three-minute commercial break (each separate video was unique); and they emphasized the formal status of music video by placing each video next to others so that each individual video was made distinctive not just on its own audio-visual merits but by dint of its reinforced 'music-video-ness' within a select sequence.

From its first inception one of the defining features of *The Chart Show* was its rapid assembly-to-transmission schedule, something which the relationship between *Top of the Pops* and the UK singles chart could not emulate. Channel 4's weekly press information pack trumpeted the show's unique selling points from Friday 2 May 1986: 'The programme is compiled from data gathered and processed by MRIB and completed within three hours of transmission, therefore providing the most immediate and accurate rundown of the charts available' (Channel 4 Press Packs 1986).

In reality the timeframe for the completion of the show's second half (which covered that week's singles chart) was more like four-and-a-half hours from the chart's publication at midday on a Friday, through sourcing the videos, compiling the chart and editing the show which was then delivered by dispatch rider to Channel 4's offices. Editorial decisions, which sometimes went against notable stars (for example Madonna's 'The Look of Love' (1987) didn't make the cut), had to be exercised under pressure from both the production schedule and the relentless pluggers. On-screen features like the notoriously illegible 'Fact Files' were

mixed in live as the show went out – they were the closest the programme came to editorial commentary.

Popular commercial television has the power not only to deliver significant audiences to advertisers, but to influence the structural dynamics of the production sector. *The Chart Show's* hectic Friday afternoon routine determined the production rosters of video makers and ritualized their cycles. Its 'exclusives' also became a fierce ground for competition in the industry. Neil Ferris of Brilliant! PR admired Keith Macmillan's no-nonsense approach: 'If they want your video for an exclusive, they tell you and stick to it. They don't go back on it. And if they don't want your video they will also tell you straight. They don't tell you what it would take to improve the video, make it more Chart Show-worthy, they don't act as video A&R people' (Knight 1996a: 16). But, as Robert Lemon at Sharp End PR commented, the value of an 'exclusive' could not be overestimated: 'If your sales people can tell the retailers they have a Chart Show exclusive it means something. And once you're given an exclusive it's usual for the programme to continue their coverage if and when the song charts, so that it may get played three or four weeks running' (ibid). Early beneficiaries of this exposure in Series 1 (1986) were George Michael ('A Different Corner'), Falco ('Rock Me Amadeus') and Peter Gabriel ('Sledgehammer'). The show's validity and vitality, based on its eclecticism and its rigorous off-screen selection process, was challenged however, almost as soon as it had become established, not from the critics or rival broadcasters, but from the music industry itself.

### **The BPI Dispute**

John Cummins had lit the touchpaper in what became an incendiary conflict, with comments he made at a workshop organized by the Association of Independent Producers, which were reported in *Music Week* before *The Chart Show* had even begun transmission. Cummins

had allegedly accused record companies of a lack of investment in music video and of only making promos to 'shut up the artist'. These comments met with a robust reaction from John Benedict of Chrysalis Group who insisted that broadcasters like Channel 4 should step into line with their European counterparts and pay for 'what is essentially, from your point of view, very cheap material' (Anon. 1986b: 21). This debate between UK broadcasters and the record labels' trade body, the British Phonographic Industry (BPI), had been simmering for some months, but the launch of *The Chart Show* (the first UK music programme to treat music videos exclusively as an index of a song/artist's chart popularity and commercial value) brought matters to the boil. The BPI instructed its members to cease supplying television companies with free videos after 31 May 1986. Cummins, at the eye of the storm, retorted that videos were promotional tools and that the broadcaster already bore the cost of making the programmes on which they were shown. The BPI maintained that *The Chart Show* was getting free content (Wohrle 1986). Behind the rhetoric, both the BBC and Channel 4 waited to see what kind of payment BPI might propose. Meanwhile, the ITV companies, including Tyne Tees, called the BPI's bluff by insisting their music programmes could survive without videos (Anon. 1986c).

The dispute was evidence of the tacit recognition, by all sides, of the increased market value and cultural status of music video in what John Mundy called 'the visual economy of popular music' (Mundy 1999: 243). A 'BPI spokesman' was quoted in *Melody Maker* as saying 'Music videos are no longer short simple promos. Today they're mini epics and their use on television is increasing dramatically' (Anon. 1986d).

The BBC's *Top of the Pops* producer Michael Hurll spoke at a seminar at the International Music & Media Conference in May 1986 in Montreux entitled 'How well is music being handled by the media?'. He concluded that broadcasters were in a cleft stick: 'TV producers and directors can't compete with the video clip in terms of resources available' he accepted. '*The Tube* is one of the best programmes around, but it doesn't matter what you do on TV in

pop music. You'll only get 1-1.5million people watching' (Anon. 1986e: 4). The dominance of *Top of the Pops*' 'variety show' formula made competition difficult and alternative programming based on video clips was only economically viable if their costs were kept down.

As the BPI deadline loomed, with no agreement in place, the temperature of the debate rose. Keith Macmillan of Video Visuals requested direct talks with the BPI: 'I am the one who has to do the deals to buy in promos. I am the one that guarantees and indemnifies Channel 4 against being sued if something hasn't been cleared. They should be talking to me'. But Patrick Isherwood, legal adviser at the BPI, read things differently: 'Macmillan said he was not prepared to talk unless we instructed our members to continue supplying him'. Meanwhile, the BBC were brokering a separate agreement with BPI, around a payment of £75 per video, and on their acceptance of the principle of payment the BPI sanctioned their continued supply (Griffen 1986: 3). Rumour had it that the BPI were asking for a screening fee of £500 per clip (Anon. 1986f: 4).

Channel 4 defied the ban and put out *The Chart Show* on the 6 and 14 of June 1986 and broadcast shows that included, in the BPI's words, 'a large number of videos from several of our members' (Anon. 1986g: 1). Island Records was one of the major labels who ignored the embargo by supplying a 1983 video of Grace Jones performing 'My Jamaican Guy' which was screened on 6 June. The situation grew more complex when Miles Copeland announced that his IRS would resign from the BPI. In a press statement IRS said it felt that 'the BPI's position is against the interests of IRS and its artists as it will tend to discourage broadcasters from programming adventurous and unproved artists of the kind signed to IRS in favour of established artists' (Anon. 1986g: 4). The BPI responded expressing regret and warning, 'the council will now have to consider whether the actions taken by some members are compatible with continued membership' (ibid.). This disquiet within the music industry spread further. Miles Clennell of Directors International expressed the concerns of video

producers: 'It's still early days but if it dragged on I'd say it would have a serious effect on some of the companies who do nothing else but promos. Some could even disappear' (Anon. 1986h: 6). And Richard Bell of Vivid confirmed that the dispute was hitting smaller producers hardest because they were less likely to have guaranteed American and European sales for their clips. Keith Macmillan seized the opportunity to exploit this confusion claiming: 'The Chart Show is a special case; it's the only show on TV featuring specialist music videos and we're promoting new talent. We're providing a valuable service for the music industry. What the BPI is doing is shooting many of its members in the foot!' (Anon. 1986i).

But having screened two shows after the ban was imposed, Channel 4 pulled *The Chart Show* on 20 June 1986. In an internal memo making provision to show alternative music content in its regular slot, John Cummins wrote to Colin Leventhal, Channel 4's Head of Programme Acquisition: 'Wording for this evening's Presentation – "We are sorry that we are not able to bring you THE CHART SHOW this evening because of a dispute with the British Phonographic Industry. In the meantime, look forward to REWIND" (Cummins 1986). In the event, *The Chart Show* wouldn't run again until 8 August. Whilst the popular music press reported discontent in some quarters of the recording industry about this embargo, *Sounds* reminded its readers: 'Britain is virtually the only country where TV stations don't pay for using videos' (Anon. 1986j).

The legal battle grew more complex still. Despite Channel 4's public statement that this was a dispute with the BPI, the decision to pull the show had been prompted by the intervention of the Musicians' Union. Keith Macmillan complained to *Music Week*:

The MU has not cleared the promos we were hoping to use, and is refusing to do so on the basis that PPL has not given clearance for the sound recordings ...

The MU takes the view that a video sound recording is a gramophone record, but Channel 4 and I say it's a soundtrack, and therefore doesn't need PPL



clearance. It is at best a dubious legal point ... I have to ask who's losing this battle? The MU have lost payments for members this week, and the record companies have lost sales tomorrow – is it worth the struggle? (Anon. 1986k: 4).

Having settled an annual flat-rate deal in the region of £150,000 with the BBC, and completed an agreement with Tyne Tees by the end of June - the first commercial station to accede to the principle of payment - the BPI clearly felt this was a worthwhile struggle (Anon. 1986l: 3). By 26 July *Music Week* reported that the BPI were in negotiation with *Music Box* (ITV, 1984-1987) for their late-night music video show to be shown on Yorkshire Television, and even at Channel 4 the producers of the *Max Headroom Show*, Chrysalis Visual Programming, proceeded with their forthcoming series on the basis of a separate agreement with the BPI. Keith Macmillan's *Chart Show* was looking increasingly isolated (Anon. 1986m: 6). On 7 August Channel 4 issued a press release announcing the return of *The Chart Show* on 8 August, following a deal with BPI covering the twelve remaining programmes in the series and a planned Christmas Special. Again, this was secured by means of a blanket payment the details of which remained undisclosed (Channel 4 Press Release 1986).

The dispute marked an important staging post in British television's recognition of the status of music video as a commercial and legal entity, as well as an immensely popular aesthetic phenomenon. Firstly, the principle of payment for video as programme content rather than commercial advertising was conceded, thus bringing British broadcasters into line with Europe and the United States. This solidified the synchronisation of sound and music in the unique video format which prevented further claims such as those mounted by the MU that the soundtrack was a broadcast audio recording. Similarly, on the commercial front, whilst the BPI had originally sought deals on a per video basis, the agreements with broadcasters brokered during the summer of 1986 all resulted in blanket agreements which conformed to television's established content-purchase practices. It was thus, on the finer points of principle, that music video in Britain became both formalized as a discrete and indivisible

audio-visual entity and aggregated as marketable television content. This had the dual effect of securing the popularity and value to advertisers of television video music shows for the next generation, while stimulating the industry's output of music video and increasing its production budgets. By the end the 1980s music video was the essential calling card of most music acts with their eye on singles chart success.

### **Commercial Effects**

Whilst *The Chart Show* and MTV led the way in driving demand for music video and increasing production across the board, the effects in the late 1980s were mixed. At a conference on Music Television in Europe in late September 1988, Nordisk Television's Lennart Bergvall complained that 'with the advent of music video, the threshold for establishing new acts has been raised' (Laing 1988: 23). Kate Phillips, a producer at Techniques of Persuasion, celebrated the fact that 'promos are just about the only way left of seeing raw, raw talent ... Literally anyone can walk off the street and make a promo – that's a wonderful, exciting thing'. Yet she maintained that 'record companies view the job as a stone in their shoe ... There's no question that video and visual aspects do help to sell a band's records, but you can't see it on a returns sheet' (Anon. 1988b: 34). None the less, by the end of 1988 it was possible to measure the effect of *The Chart Show* in attracting significant audiences and in predicting chart-toppers, exposure on the show in 'The Chart Race' leading in almost every case to an improved chart performance the following week and repeat showings helping to prolong the chart life of some tracks. And the showcasing of music video on television had an impact also on the sell-through music video market where sales increased 100 per cent between 1987 and the end of 1988 as more domestic households acquired VHS players (Anon. 1988c: 1 & 4). This rate of expansion also led to criticism within the production sector that creative talent was not valued in this process. Selina Webb reported: 'As video booms and promos find themselves cropping up in a variety

of places, some producers are beginning to wonder isn't it time they got the credit and royalties for their work':

The public spent around £30m on sell through music video tapes in 1988, while an estimated £10m a year is paid to the record industry for the use of pop promos on network and satellite TV across Europe – with not a penny going to the creative originators of the visuals (Webb 1989b: 6).

A fledgling trade body, the Music, Film and Video Producers' Association (MFVPA), was established with the aim of negotiating standard contracts with the BPI, yet it struggled to gain adequate representation within the cottage industry of video production where record labels retained the power. At the same time Webb's review of the video market in 1988 adjudged that 'cliché-ridden dross has been thick on the ground' despite the 'explosion in dance music' extending 'to video in 1988, prompting the year's only new breed of promo'. And she reflected that while 'independents have commissioned some of the most memorable promos of the year, their budgets have often been rock-bottom'. She concluded, rather gloomily, that 'those shrinking budgets and record companies' reluctance to commission until a record seems assured of a top 50 chart placing suggests that the industry is struggling to justify video's worth as a marketing tool with the limited broadcast opportunities currently available' (Webb 1989a: 6).

### ***The ITV Chart Show (1989-98)***

The reality of those limitations, in Autumn 1988, had been compounded by Channel 4's decision not to re-commission *The Chart Show* beyond its third series which ended on 30 September. In the Spring of 1988 youth commissioner John Cummins left to join Disney, and was replaced by Stephen Garrett who, like the channel's new Chief Executive Michael Grade, had experience at Granada and the BBC (Bonner with Aston 2003: 259-60). Yet

despite rumours of its demise, Keith Macmillan's Video Visuals (which had since *The Chart Show*'s success also pioneered in partnership with LWT the innovative, award-winning youth current affairs show *Network 7*), was ultimately reprieved by Yorkshire Television and promised an ITV network slot on Saturday mornings. Macmillan could barely disguise his glee in moving to the 'mainstream':

The incredible growth in the pop video market over recent years has created a new demand from TV audiences. We're very pleased that ITV is prepared to go for that audience not by competing directly with shows like *Top of the Pops* but by supporting something new, appealing and fast-moving (Anon. 1988a: 1).

*The Chart Show*'s ITV makeover, which saw Macmillan's team of Gail Screene, Philip Davey and Suzanne Lewis joined by Flora Andrews, included extending the running-time to an hour, screening a repeat on Sunday nights, and updating the colourful, trademark graphics, courtesy of Louise Hadley's Dubner computer programme. Yet the format, and the audience size and demographic, remained largely the same. Some industry critics were disappointed. Jason Beck at WEA felt it was diminished:

The standard of the programme has fallen since it moved to ITV, but it's largely the record companies' fault. Instead of going ahead and trying new things they think 'we'd better not do that, perhaps TV won't like it', when in fact TV wants better standards (Webb 1989c: 28).

However, Jeff Goy at RCA explained the creative difficulties which mitigated against experimentation: 'We've also got to think of *Top of the Pops*, think internationally, and of course what's right for the artist – not all of our artists are suitable for exposure on *The Chart Show* – but it is one of the most important outlets, and occasionally the only outlet, so we have to consider it' (ibid.). Pedro Romhanyi, then of London Records, was more upbeat about its virtues:

*The Chart Show* is the most modern, comprehensive and varied music show on television. Its strength is that it places videos of high production value alongside those of earthier virtues – and it's unmissable. Because it is broad in its outlook you don't have to be restricted in what you do (ibid.).

This variety and consequent versatility became an enduring virtue of the format. Of the 50 or 60 videos viewed by *The Chart Show* team each week, on average sixteen would be played in full, perhaps half of those achieving exclusives. Macmillan maintained that they aimed to mix chart singles with new and 'interesting stuff', that there wasn't such a thing as a *Chart Show* video, just a 'good video' and that the increasing emphasis on the chart with the move to ITV was offset by the innovation happening in the fields of dance and rock. And he continued to assert Video Visuals' editorial independence: 'We don't let anyone plug us. The record companies send the video to us and we either like it or we don't, end of story, no deals' (ibid.). Macmillan's fierce defence of *The Chart Show's* editorial independence was especially potent rhetoric at a time when MTV's anti-competition practices were under scrutiny and allegations of collusion with major record labels were the subject of litigation in the United States (see Banks 1996).

*The Chart Show* made an effective transition to ITV and quickly established a Saturday morning cultural ritual for the under-30s with an ideological insouciance that is every television executive's dream. As David Knight, editor of *Promo*, reflected:

From that moment it established its huge importance to the record industry. Although its audience of around 1.4million pales in comparison to *Top of the Pops*, its influence on those young music consumers about to do their Saturday spending down the record store has never been underestimated (Knight 1996a: 15).

The link between video airplay and record sales was confirmed in a survey conducted by *Promo* (Anon. 1998a: 6).

However, despite (and in part because of) its influence, the show was soon embroiled in fresh controversy and legal disputes. Firstly, some at the BBC took umbrage with *The Chart Show's* granting of 'exclusives'. *Music Week* reported that *Top of the Pops* staff had been accused of 'leaning on pluggers and record companies ... telling pluggers that any videos shown exclusively on *The Chart Show* will not be shown on the BBC programme' (Anon. 1989a: 1 & 4). Whilst this proved to be no more than a flexing of rival muscles, it did have repercussions. Video Performance Ltd (the industry's video performance licensing body that had been established in 1984 as an adjunct to Phonographic Performance Ltd the music industry's collecting society) issued a public reminder that 'the VPL licence to *The Chart Show* and *Top of the Pops* is non-exclusive' (Anon. 1989b: 4) Indeed, while it was MTV in the United States who were being accused of monopolistic practices, in the UK it was not the shows nor the broadcasters themselves that wielded market power, but the industry's representative bodies.

The BPI and the MU had been at the centre of earlier disputes and, since 1988, VPL had introduced a system of tariff collection from broadcasters of licence fees for the broadcast of music videos. Following its transfer to ITV Video Visuals had signed an agreement with VPL which saw annual fees rise incrementally. By 1993 VPL was demanding a tariff of £450,000 for a ten-month period in 1994 (Clark-Meads and Kingston 1995: 4). As *Music Week* reported, although 'the new tariff allows 20% discount for programmes featuring 100% music videos ... recently expired agreements with producers such as Video Visuals (*Chart Show*) and *Music Box* (*Raw Power*) are understood to have included reductions of 50% and more' (Anon. 1993a: 1). Keith Macmillan began proceedings against VPL at the Copyright Tribunal in June 1993. The initial hearing ruled against VPL's 'request that ... Video Visuals should pay the rate for screening promos which operated in 1992. Instead, Video Visuals, which

was awarded costs, has been paying a lower interim rate' (Anon. 1993c: 1). But the dispute rumbled on for almost another two years until it was finally resolved in an out-of-court settlement in March 1995. In reaching a compromise both sides claimed victory. *Music Week* reported that 'the deal is believed to retain the existing tariff system introduced by VPL in 1993, but with an adjusted rate' (Anon. 1995: 1). Macmillan claimed he had 'regained the freedom to evolve the format of the show. This is a great opportunity to change the pacing, introduce new slots and make room in the running order for even more videos' (ibid.). But a spokesperson for VPL insisted that it was only because Video Visuals had made concessions that agreement had been possible: 'This was the first ever acceptable proposal we've had from Keith Macmillan' (Clark-Meads 1995: 46). Whatever the truth, once again legal and commercial dispute wrought aesthetic changes in television presentation.

The cost-effective changes involved showing fewer, but shorter clips, 'extending the video content of the Chart News section from three videos to six, and the Next Week section at the end of the show [to] three clips instead of one' (ibid). It was reported that further format changes, including new 3D graphics, were under discussion with the ITV network. Change had been a constant of *The Chart Show* in the early 1990s, beginning with sponsorship deals first with Pepe jeans and then Twix (Mars Confectionary), leading to a revision of the opening titles and bumpers (Anon. 1993b: 3). A year after the VPL agreement, Keith Macmillan was promising 'a gutsier, more mature show after a £250,000 revamp' for May 1996, to coincide with the show's tenth anniversary. Aside from a graphics makeover (employing Louise Hadley's Lightwave software and a dramatic black-screen opening accompanied by Philip Davey's new theme tune and sound effects) the show's data collection (by now a telephone poll of retail outlets rather than radio airplay) was augmented by collecting up to 11am on a Saturday morning. And the new show featured 'Demo Corner, in which new unsigned bands get the chance to have their home-made videos shown' (Davey 1998: 26), and included a new interactive 'battle of the bands' feature which enabled viewers to vote for a choice of two videos with the results revealed at the end of each show.

Additionally, Des Burkinshaw's off-screen interviews and on-screen 'gossip', fleshed out the 'notorious info-boxes' (ibid). Most important of all, the new format would go out 'live', part three being edited while parts one and two were on air. This innovation was, Macmillan claimed 'the beginning of the age of desktop broadcasting' (Knight 1996a: 15).

Pluggers responded positively to the changes. Matt Connolly of Fleming Molloy commented: 'As long as they continue with four or five exclusive slots it will continue to be a great vehicle for us, but making it more interactive with the audience will be useful because you get a better idea of what people want' (Eade 1996: 1). And record companies acknowledged its domestic power. Mike O'Keefe of Sony Music remarked: 'We don't specifically commission for *The Chart Show*, but for the commercial viability of a video it is certainly taken into consideration. And for the UK, before you make it on MTV and The Box, it is still the only yardstick by which videos are measured' (Knight 1996a: 15).

Editorially, *The Chart Show's* independence remained a source of pride on its tenth anniversary. Philip Davey reflected:

On the surface of it, it's just a bunch of videos thrown together but, because we were promo makers, there's a certain amount of care and love that goes into it. The artists see the importance of the show. We've helped quite a lot of new bands over the years and that's incredibly satisfying to me (Anon. 1996c: 4).

As well as assisting artists, *The Chart Show's* virtual video monopoly on UK terrestrial television promoted directorial talent, raised the profile of particular production companies (such as Oil Factory and Black Dog) and increased competition within the production sector. In 1995 'the top ten companies increased their share of *Chart Show* airplay from 58% to 61% and UK production companies captured 66% of all airplay (compared with 31% for US companies)' (Anon. 1996a: 11). The partnership of Dom & Nic (then Hammer & Tongs) were



the most-shown directors on *The Chart Show* in 1996 (Knight 1997: 23). In the same year the Brit Awards Best Video By A British Artist winner was decided by a phone vote of *Chart Show* viewers, the show itself running short extracts from all the nominees between 20 January and 17 February (Anon. 1996b: 8). By this time *The Chart Show* was being shown in fifteen countries. The following year *Promo* reported that 'there were only two Chart Shows screened in 1997 that did not feature the work of an Oil Factory director' (Anon. 1998b: 24). In April 1998 the same journal observed:

The battle for exclusives had led to *The Chart Show* becoming more adventurous in its programming which has led to quality videos for less familiar names such as David Holmes, Libido, Pressure Drop, The Unbelievable Truth, Gomez and Pitchshifter, picking up precious screenings. The programme has arguably held on to its audience share by screening the best promos available (Anon. 1998d: 11).

Despite its terrestrial market dominance in music video, by 1998 the advent of MTV UK and The Box was clearly changing the dynamics if not the fortunes of *The Chart Show*. David Knight reported 'It is the ITV Network, which has recently renewed *The Chart Show* contract for a 12<sup>th</sup> year, which is the motivating force behind the quest for exclusives' (Knight 1998a: 26). Producer Philip Davey was, according to *Promo*, 'aware that the capacity to get exclusives is somewhat under threat by MTV's UK policy to ask for videos well upfront of the [single] release date, in the same way that singles are released to radio' (ibid). Knight reflected: 'In a way, MTV UK has exploited the advantage of being a full network in addition to the limitations of *The Chart Show*'s remit: the fact that the ITV Network demands *The Chart Show* get exclusives, but generally wants them close to a single's release date' (ibid).

*The Chart Show's* position was further called into question by the surprise decision of Keith Macmillan, its creator, to leave in March 1998, replaced as Executive Producer by Gail Screene. But the same press release reported the show's viewing figures had almost doubled since its tenth anniversary refit (Anon. 1998c: 4-5) Four months later ITV Network executive Nigel Pickard announced a new look Saturday morning schedule featuring a children's entertainment show fronted by Ant and Dec called *SMTV Live*. *The Chart Show* aired for the last time on Saturday 22 August 1998. The company Macmillan founded with Screene and Davey, Video Visuals, continued trading on its established strength in television animation graphics until in May 2002 Macmillan launched a digital network Chart Show TV which quickly expanded to embrace children's TV, music and movies.

### **Conclusion – *The Chart Show's* legacy**

The demise of *The Chart Show* from its commanding position as the dominant British music video programme in 1998 can be seen as symbolic of the broader decline in UK terrestrial television chart pop music shows (*Top of the Pops* would end its monumental 42-year run eight years later in 2006), but it also marked a return to live performance shows over video formats across broadcast schedules. But the end of this particular era should also be understood within the context of developments in the music video industry. As David Knight reported, one change was 'the increasingly common policy of making promos for priority acts way up-front instead of waiting to see what response a single gets and rushing to complete a video for the week of release' (Knight 1998b: 6). Although music video budgets were constrained by the recession of the early 1990s by the end of the decade established artists could still command budgets of over £100,000 with the promise of wide international exposure via the proliferation of digital outlets (including in the UK MTV, VH-1 and The Box). Another related trend was the reduction in new entry budgets (in the £10,000-£20,000 bracket) (ibid). At the same time, *The Chart Show's* disappearance from the terrestrial

schedules marked the beginnings of a greater diversification in music video consumption which has resulted in the current dominance of online outlets at the expense of the once mighty satellite and cable providers (most notably MTV itself). During what has rightly been seen as a golden age of British music video, *The Chart Show* for many years occupied an unrivalled place in respect of audience habits and industry schedules alike. And its innovative format made it a television vehicle ideally suited to its content. There is no doubt that whilst music video as a form has continued to flourish despite the changing technologies of the popular music economy, the durability of that form in the UK and beyond, aesthetically, commercially and legally, owes much to the function of *The Chart Show* in consolidating its status.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> From 1984 to 1987 Music Box was a music satellite and cable channel sponsored by Richard Branson's Virgin that sought to offer a version of MTV for the European market.

<sup>2</sup> This show became *The Roxy* (1987-8) which was produced by Tyne Tees following the demise of *The Tube* and fronted by David Jensen and Kevin Sharkey. But it was dropped after one series.

<sup>3</sup> For more on the terms by which MTV defined music video aesthetically, commercially and legally see especially Aufderheide (1986), Banks (1996) and Jones (2005).

## Acknowledgement

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